

THE BACKGROUND TO THE MUSICAL "HELOISE"

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Heloise was born in either 1101 or 1102. Her Uncle, Fulbert, became her guardian and sent her to be educated at a nunnery. She became a legend by the time she was 16. *"I had scarcely passed from boyhood to maturity when I first heard your name and reputation. You have surpassed all women and gone beyond most men."* So wrote Peter the Venerable (1092-1156). Fulbert was so proud of Heloise's achievements that he hired Peter Abelard as her tutor in 1118.

Abelard was born in Brittany in 1079. Choosing the life of a philosopher, he travelled all over France. By the time he returned to Notre Dame he was 39 and famous throughout Christendom. Abelard was controversial and charismatic. He was also famous as a songwriter and it was his reputation in this area that first attracted Heloise to him.

Thus Fulbert hired the most controversial philosopher of his day as tutor to his 17 year old niece, a girl with an international reputation for learning and beauty. Some writers have theorised that Fulbert was actually throwing the two together, some that he was simple-minded, others that he was in love with his niece and, in some way, wanted to win her favour. Whatever his intentions, Abelard and Heloise quickly became lovers.

Abelard wrote a characteristic account of the affair 14 years later: *"I considered all the usual attractions for a lover and decided that she was the one to bring to my bed, confident that I would have an easy success, for at that time I had exceptional good looks as well as my great reputation to commend me and feared no refusal from any woman who I might favour with my love. We were united first under one roof, then in heart.... My hands strayed oftener to her bosom than to the pages."* Abelard lost interest in his lectures and his students began to complain. He spent too much time writing love songs, some of them mentioning Heloise by name. These were taken up and sung in the streets of Paris. Fulbert wouldn't believe the rumours but finally found them in bed together. Abelard was expelled from the house, and Heloise had to admit to her betrayed, possibly insanely jealous Uncle that she was pregnant. She was removed to Abelard's sisters house in Brittany where she had a child, named Astralabe, and then returned to Paris.

Abelard offered to marry her. Fulbert was overjoyed; his niece had made a great match. Astonishingly, Heloise turned Abelard down: her strong, individual voice breaks through. There was no prohibition against clerical marriage but for a man like Abelard the church was the only means of carving out a career and in the higher echelons marriage was unusual. For this very reason Abelard's offer depended on the fact that the marriage remained secret. Heloise was sure that Fulbert would publicise the match throughout Paris. She argued that marriage and domestic life prevented great men from achieving their potential. She believed in Abelard's thought as much as he did (there is some evidence that she co-wrote works now ascribed solely to him). In the first surviving letter from Heloise to Abelard, written many years later, she wrote: *"The name of wife may seem more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always be the word mistress, or, if you will permit me, that of concubine or whore."*

But in the end her resistance broke down. They married with Fulbert in attendance. Abelard quotes her as saying, *"We shall both be destroyed. All that is left is suffering, as great as our love has been."* His comment: *"In that she showed herself a true prophet."*

After the marriage they only saw each other furtively and Fulbert and Heloise fought most of the time. Abelard finally removed her to the Argenteuil convent where she had been brought up. They couldn't keep their hands off each other even in a nunnery. Fulbert was beside himself, perhaps thinking that having had his pleasure of her, Abelard had now consigned Heloise to the nunnery for good. One night Fulbert broke into Abelard's house with some friends and castrated him.

All Paris mourned. Abelard, unable to bear the shame entered the monastery of St Denis, ordering Heloise

to enter a nunnery. Their relationship had lasted only 18 months.

Over the next decade Heloise became an abbess, famed for her piety and organisational skills. Abelard travelled from place to place. He was found guilty of heresy and considered converting to Islam. In one monastery he believed the monks were plotting to kill him. In 1131 Abelard and Heloise met again. She and her sisters had been thrown out of her nunnery; Abelard travelled to install them in an oratory he had founded in Troyes. However, gossip drove him away.

In 1132, Abelard wrote a public justification of his life and an appeal to save him from the murderous monks of Brittany. Heloise read a copy later in that year and immediately wrote to Abelard. Her reply rails against Abelard for being a false lover, for consigning her to a convent at such a young age, for opening old wounds. She then accuses herself of hypocrisy and sexual obsession. She rages at God. At the same time the whole letter, and the one that follows it, are shot through with concern and love - both emotional and physical - for the man she is also berating. These two letters are an astonishing performance: it is an extraordinary experience to read them now and hear such an individual voice across the centuries: *"I want nothing whatever of you but yourself... Wholly guilty though I am, I am also, as you know, wholly innocent ... Oh God - If I dare say it - cruel to me in everything ... Of all wretched women, I am the most wretched... In my case the pleasures of love which we shared have been too short... (they) can scarcely be banished from my thought...even in sleep I can find no respite... Men call me chaste, they do not know what a hypocrite I am ... I have feared to offend you rather than God."*

Abelard's replies are, at first, more difficult to take. He quotes scripture and philosophy to answer Heloise point by point. He argues that though Heloise had suffered, since 1119 she has become a much respected Abbess surrounded by admiring followers, praised for her piety and her practical skills. On the other hand, Abelard has lost his masculinity, been condemned as a heretic and attacked by his brothers physically. Given their respective positions, he implies, isn't about time she stopped complaining.

Heloise's next letter is a surprise. She writes that she can't help what she feels, but the time has come to put the past behind them. *"Let's work together. Write me a rule for my order, answer these points of doctrine, let's argue about these issues."* Heloise has acquired equanimity. The rest of their correspondence is serenely loving.

Abelard died in 1142 and their friend Peter the Venerable wrote Heloise a moving letter describing Abelard's last days in which he seems to have found peace, a gentle piety and the respect of all those around him. Heloise wrote back to her friend immediately. She asked for a document absolving Abelard from his sins, and asked him to find a place for their son Astralabe. Finally she requested that Abelard's body be brought to her nunnery. In 1143 she received it and on her death in 1163 Heloise was laid beside him in the same tomb. Their bodies were moved by Napoleon and are now buried in Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris.

Their son Astralabe disappears from history. Apart from the fact that he was a monk we know nothing of him.